
The Emerging Field of Yoga Therapy

Karen Chandler, MS

Lead Member, Yoga Committee, CAM Professional Branch, Hawaii State Consortium for Integrative Health Care; Instructor, Yoga in Nature Retreats, Kapa'au, Hawaii

Yoga therapy is recognized by a growing number of medical practitioners, patients, and insurance companies as an effective treatment of physical and psychological conditions ranging from hypertension and emotional distress to chronic back pain, asthma and diabetes.¹⁻³ It shares traditional yoga's broad view of the human being as an integrated mind-body system, interacting with outer nature, ethereal forces, and past life actions (karma).⁴⁻⁶

Yoga, itself, is a classical Indian science and philosophy of personal transformation, dating back to over 2000 BC. It is a highly sophisticated system of postures, breathing and mental techniques that lead one to healthy, higher states of consciousness, and ultimate awareness of one's pure, free, non-suffering nature. Yoga shares its origins with Ayurveda, India's native naturopathic science, and offers a broad, transpersonal context for the emerging field of yoga therapy, a new discipline that yoga scholar, George Feuerstein describes as "...a first attempt to integrate traditional yogic concepts and techniques with Western medical and psychological knowledge."¹

The yogic view of health differs from the more mechanistic view of the human system often recognized in the West. In yoga, health includes peace of mind and the balanced functioning of energetic pathways, subtle bodies, and spiritual centers, in addition to the proper functioning of internal organs and physiological systems of the body-mind complex. Health is both a by-product of and a means towards yoga's transcendent goals. Hatha yoga, the system of cleansing practices (kriyas), physical poses (asanas), and breathing techniques (pranayama) most often practiced in the West, is part of an "eight-limbed" system that includes deeper states of awareness, ethical living and rules of personal conduct.

There are several current approaches to hatha yoga in the West that have developed yoga's therapeutic potential. These include Viniyoga, Kripalu Yoga, Phoenix Rising Yoga, Integrative Yoga Therapy, and Iyengar Yoga. As Feuerstein points out in his review on yoga therapy, BKS Iyengar, founder of Iyengar Yoga, has, more than any other teacher, developed hatha yoga for therapeutic purposes through precision of alignment and the use of various props and therapeutic sequences.¹ Viniyoga teacher, Gary Kraftsow of Maui, has also explored the therapeutic uses of yoga, and has authored a book on yoga therapy. In California, the Yoga Research and Education Center in California is creating a database of medical and scientific studies on yoga. This resource will be available to researchers and teachers, alike.

Unlike other body therapies, that act on single organs or systems of the body, yoga engages the whole person. Practitioners actively participate in their own health through coordinated total body movements and breathing under the quiet meditative focus of the

mind. Health benefits of yoga postures (asanas) and breathing techniques (pranayama) include the following: improved circulation, respiration, heart and other organ function,^{5,7,8,9} reduced blood pressure,¹⁰ balanced mental functioning¹¹ increased flexibility and muscle strength, and the restructuring of the tissues and supporting musculoskeletal system of the body.^{2,5,6} Hatha yoga also promotes an acute sense of body awareness, to help prevent new or recurring illness and injury, and to develop healthy lifestyle habits.^{1,12,13,14}

According to Feuerstein, the earliest medical studies on yoga were conducted at the Yoga Institute in Santacruz, Bombay, founded in 1918. Other research centers include Kivalyadhama in Lonavla, founded in 1924. In the West, the Yoga Research and Education Center (YREC) in California, established by Feuerstein, is currently creating a data base of medical and scientific studies on yoga, as a resource for researchers and teachers. Here in Hawaii, the Hawaii State Consortium for Integrative Health Care has formed a yoga committee within its CAM Professions Branch to explore the possibility of medical research in yoga, as well as yoga education, and training in yoga therapy.

Becker summarized a number of medical studies on yoga in a recent review: "Uses of Yoga in Psychiatry and Medicine".² These studies document yoga's effective role as the sole or adjunct treatment in a variety of disorders: from chronic pain¹⁵ and carpal tunnel syndrome³ to asthma,⁷ diabetes,⁹ cardiac dysfunction,⁸ seizures,¹¹ and hypertension.¹⁰

Schmidt et al (1997),⁸ for example, found a substantial reduction in cardiovascular risk factors and hormones during a comprehensive, residential, 3-month Kriya yoga training and vegetarian nutrition study. A definitive study by Nagendra and Nagarathna (1986)⁷ followed asthmatic individuals for up to 54 months, who had initially participated in yoga training. They showed a highly significant improvement in most of the specific parameters, and reduction in the use of medication. Jain et al (1993)⁹ found a decrease in rates of hyperglycemic and hypoglycemia as well as in the need for oral hypoglycemic drugs after 40 days of training in yogic techniques. Yoga has also been shown as an effective practice for maintaining health and a sense of greater well-being in healthy individuals.^{13,14}

Despite the number of documented research studies, investigators and scholars point out the need for more research, including illness-specific studies and longitudinal studies,¹ and open trials to examine claims by yogis on the efficacy of yoga for various conditions.² Challenges facing the investigator include the need for consistent and often long-term practice by participants before results are available; difficulties involved in obtaining a large consistent sample size; potential bias through the effect of individual yoga instructors

on study participants; as well as the complexity of interventions and the inability of western science to detect, measure, or control for yoga's more subtle balancing and healing mechanisms.

There is also a need to further educate healthcare professionals and the public in the benefits and applications of yoga. As Becker points out, health care providers rarely prescribe yoga as either a treatment or preventative, lifestyle practice.

Feurstein predicts a bright future for yoga therapy. He notes the recent interest by health insurance companies in including yoga and yoga therapy into their programs, and the continued development of higher professional standards in yoga therapy training. He and others caution us, however, against shallow training in yoga therapy, and against 'yoga reductionism' or a too simplistic view and application of the yoga's larger holistic and spiritual science. They also remind us that yoga therapy is, in Feuerstein's words "...still in the process of defining itself both relative to medical and psychiatric professions and the India yoga tradition."¹

During this process, traditional yogis need to embrace the trend towards therapeutic yoga as an entry point for new students and potential devotees. Western researchers and yoga therapists need to embrace yoga's broad holistic practices and transpersonal view of human health and existence in order to appreciate, utilize and explain the full mechanisms and benefits of yoga-as-therapy and a preventative lifestyle practice.

Ultimately, it is all "yoga", which means to yoke, or unite, and in our sense, perhaps, to integrate without loss of essence. Whether viewed as a therapy or a spiritual discipline, yoga has the potential to lift us out of a transient life full of suffering and disease, into a state of pure and eternal well-being.

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